

Abbey Letter



Christmas 2008
no. 236

Cover: Br. Martin gives a tour of the sacristy to a local chapter of the American Sewing Guild.



Abbot Andrew



Prior Aelred



Fr. Jude



Fr. William

The monks of St. Gregory's Abbey wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and thank you for your prayers and gifts.



Br. Martin



Br. Abraham



Br. Cuthbert

NOTES

Bishop Edward Little of the Diocese of Northern Indiana was with us on retreat August 14th - 18th.

Br. Abraham led a retreat October 3rd - 4th at the Threshold, a retreat center between Marfa and Ft. Davis, Texas.

On October 18th, Br. Cuthbert attended a meeting of the Vocational Discernment Program of the Diocese of Western Michigan to talk about Benedictine Spirituality.

Fr. Aelred attended the Prior's Workshop at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota November 6th - 10th. Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB spoke on the topic of Early Monastic Insights on Self-Knowledge and Spiritual Development.

Fr. Donald Tauscher, OSB is scheduled to lead our community retreat December 1st - 8th. He is a monk of St. John's Abbey

in Collegeville, Minnesota, who has an extensive retreat ministry.

On December 12th, Abbot Andrew is scheduled to travel to Fort Wayne, Indiana to meet with the students of Keystone School, a private Christian school, where he will discuss Benedictine Spirituality and plainsong music.

Building project updates (including photos) can be seen at our website. Also available are links to purchase calendars and books, request prayers, make donations, and update mailing list information. Make sure to hit the refresh or reload button on your browser to get the latest information for each page.

saintgregorysthreerivers.org

The mail order price for Abbot Andrew's book *Tools For Peace* has gone up to \$24.00 due to changes in postage rates.



Construction continues on our new bell tower and church entrance.

2009 St. Gregory's Abbey Calendar

13 months, 15 photos, with the Abbey's liturgical calendar

\$10.00 Please send ____ copies. Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Any payment in excess of the calendar price will be gratefully accepted as a gift to the abbey.

St. Gregory's Abbey, 56500 Abbey Road, Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595



Books from St. Gregory's Abbey

Singing God's Praises (1998)

history of the community, select Abbey letter articles, photographs

\$20.00 Please send ____ copies. \$ _____

Born in the Darkest Time of Year (2004)

15 Christmas stories by Abbot Andrew

\$16.00 Please send ____ copies. \$ _____

Tools For Peace (2007)

Abbot Andrew's reflections on St. Benedict and René Girard

\$24.00 Please send ____ copies. \$ _____

Enclosed is \$_____ in full payment. Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

Name _____

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Changed Perspective

The main activity here at St. Gregory's consists of public corporate prayer in the Abbey Church, and the main part of that prayer takes the form of recitation of the Psalms. Through the course of a week, the entire book of 150 Psalms is recited. That seems like a lot, and in most places it would be. In his *Rule for Monasteries*, St. Benedict laments the fact that although his monastic predecessors recited the entire Book of Psalms each day, "May we, lukewarm that we are, perform it at least in a whole week!" I do not share Benedict's grief; once a week works well for us. Many monasteries use a monthly schedule for reciting all the psalms, and others use a two-week scheme. Those schedules are good too, because they work well for them. Besides monasteries using the Book of Psalms in prayer, many churches offer public morning and evening prayer throughout the week, and most of that prayer also involves psalmody. However, most people do not live in monasteries, and most people do not live close to a church that offers daily public prayer, but many of those people still want to be involved in the psalmody going on in monasteries and churches around the world, so they adopt their own method of praying the Psalms. All in all, there are a lot of psalms read, prayed, sung, and chanted around the world every day.

Often, people who first encounter the Psalms, whether in public or private prayer or reading, find some of them surprisingly bloodthirsty. This category of psalms includes laments from the oppressed and cries for vengeance on the oppressors. Some individuals and groups simply omit these violent psalms from their prayers. Others find ways to soften these psalms by using them as analogies for inner struggles within themselves. Others deal with the brutality of the Psalms by acknowledging it for what it is; the Psalms come from a violent time (a good reminder of the violent brutality of our own society). The competing empires and kingdoms of the Iron Age from which the Psalms come were made up of real people who really prayed, and even if our understanding of God has changed and become less vengeful and ethnocentric, we can still use their prayers as bases for our own. We can also use them as prods to see if our understanding of God really is less vengeful and ethnocentric than Iron Age attitudes.

With experience, most people find ways to pray the psalms that express the laments of the oppressed, because even if they are not being oppressed at the time, they can pray with and for all those around the world who are suffering. That is how I approach these psalms. I had a wonderful childhood surrounded by people who loved me, and as a middle class American I am one of the richest persons in the world with the best in medical care and educational opportunities at my fingertips. Even as a monk who has no personal possessions, my



community provides me with all I could need, and more than I should want. So I pray the psalms of lament for all those around the world whom I read about in the newspaper or see on news broadcasts that are suffering from natural or manmade disasters. Even when I am feeling slightly oppressed by others or by work waiting to be done, these psalms serve to remind me of how good my life really is and how I need to stop whining.

The discomfort occurs when the psalmists ask God to bring disaster on the oppressors. Such an attitude does not fit well with our call to go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, and charitably bless those who hate us. Perhaps the most famous examples of cursing in the Psalms occur in what are otherwise considered by some to be two of the most beautiful songs in the world: Psalm 137, in which homesick exiles explain how they have put away their musical instruments because they are too heartbroken to sing anymore; and Psalm 139, in which a poet expresses wonderment at his own being and amazement at God's infinite nature. Yet near the end of both of these, bloody curses are added: the homesick exiles bless anyone who will dash their oppressors' children on the rocks, and the poet declares his hatred for those who do not share his attitudes toward God. These examples are only two of many such curses interspersed throughout the Psalter. Some other psalms seem to be an almost unbroken stream of hateful desires and hopes for retribution upon enemies, and it is not surprising that many people find them difficult to pray.

I have found a way to use the cursing psalms as an aid to foster my own prayer. It might not be the most proper use of these psalms, but so far it has helped me, and maybe that in itself makes it a proper use. When one of these bloodthirsty verses comes up as we pray in the monastery church, I remind myself that I am not the innocent person cursing the sinner; I am the sinner

making life miserable for the people around me. I need to change. I need to ask not only for forgiveness, but also for the strength to repent — to really change and make the love of God the center of my life rather than keeping myself in that position. The people I come in contact with everyday are the psalmists crying out for deliverance from the oppression I bring them because of my selfishness. I cause them to sin by driving them to curse me.

This realization of my own oppressive behavior does not derive from an overly scrupulous sense of unworthiness. I am a beautiful Child of God created to love and be loved, just like everyone else. But I have allowed my own pettiness to hurt myself and the people around me. I am not the only one who is guilty of this. The tiny, daily misdemeanors we all commit in order to get what we want when we want it are not fair to anyone, including ourselves. Knowing this should not drive us to despair. Rather, it should prompt a firm resolve to change, knowing that even though only God can transform us, only we as individuals can allow God to do that, and only we can purposefully use the gifts that God has given us as tools to change. We are worth the effort it takes to grow into the mature individuals we are created to be.

Changing one's perspective from oppressed to oppressor might not help everyone pray these psalms as it has helped me, but that's OK. It is good to heed the advice to pray as we can, not as we can't. Maybe the one thing to avoid is putting ourselves in the position of God and presuming that it is our right to carry out the curses.

— Br. Abraham

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St. Gregory's Abbey July Vocation Program

Spend two weeks (or more) in July with the monks of St. Gregory's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery of the Episcopal Church at Three Rivers, Michigan.

Worship & Pray Work & Learn

For males 18 to 45 who can stay for at least two weeks. The only cost is \$25 for registration.

For more information, use the envelope bound in this issue of the Abbey Letter or write:

July Program Director

St. Gregory's Abbey

56500 Abbey Road

Three Rivers, MI 49093

novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

Applications will be accepted after January 1, 2009.

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Saint Gregory's Abbey is the home of a community of men living under the Rule of Saint Benedict within the Episcopal Church. The center of the monastery's life is the Abbey Church, where God is worshiped in the daily round of Eucharist, Divine Office, and private prayer. Also offered to God are the monks' daily manual work, study and correspondence, ministry to guests, and occasional outside engagements.

The continuing existence of Saint Gregory's is made possible by the support of those who believe that the contemplative vocation within the Church finds valid expression there.

The monks ask your prayers and will be grateful for your offerings.

<http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org/donate.html> to donate online

Donations may be mailed to:
Saint Gregory's Abbey
56500 Abbey Road
Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595